

The Neoliberal Holocaust

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On 1 May 2009, a few dozen homeless people gathered in Katowice, Poland, to commemorate International Workers' Day. They raised the banner of the socialist Polish Peoples' Republic—a society where, they said, food was affordable and jobs were abundant. “We want to restore the First of May as a day that defends the interests of the most disadvantaged,” the march’s organizer said. For a few hours, the most neglected residents of Poland’s eleventh-largest city lamented a time when their condition not only did not exist, but could not exist. “Your indifference is our verdict,” they chanted.

Why was this march—then ignored, now forgotten—so important? What is the meaning behind its appeal to Poland’s socialist past, a legacy that has been sullied and sapped in the decades since capitalist restoration? And why is it relevant in the much larger story of the mortality crisis that swept across the former socialist states of Eastern Europe beginning in the 1990s—a catastrophe, unprecedented in peacetime, that claimed nearly 17 million lives?¹

In the process of excavating our history, we often ignore the social relations—specifically, the relations of production—that shape our experiences and, in turn, our perceptions and memories. “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,” Karl Marx wrote, “but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”² In a world dominated by capital, great pains are taken to conceal the names, the faces, and the lives of workers and the oppressed from view. Their centrality in the processes of economic production and social reproduction is hidden. The scarcity that confronts them is masked by images of abundance. When they lose their homes, become frail, or die—when they succumb to disease or hunger or desperation, or meet their end under the policeman’s knee—their demise is ascribed to the natural order of things. *The weak shall perish. Crime doesn’t pay. Work sets you free. Etc.* Katowice’s march of the homeless mattered because, in it, the most marginalized members of Poland’s society gave their verdict on a history that had banished them from its record.

Their verdict carries weight far beyond Katowice—or even Poland. It applies to the entire framework through which we reflect on the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe. The fall of states built in the image of working people not

only transformed the economic relations underpinning their societies—things and people that were valued for their social utility became valued for their capacity to generate profit. It also shifted the balance of narrative power within them. The state-owned factories were sold, the dialecticians were expelled from the academy, and the workers were expunged from the historical record. As a result, when we talk about the “End of History” and the victory of the liberal world order as *representative of progress*, we ignore not only the tremendous gains achieved for the working person in socialist societies but also the monumental violence that capitalist restoration inflicted on them and the world at large.³

The popular discourse about this period tends to dissolve the systemic into the particular. It treats the suffering as an inevitable by-product of specific “economic reforms” that former socialist states implemented rather than the intended effect of the advanced socialist societies’ regression into capitalism. It treats the issues in isolation. Men died younger not because the world around them fell to pieces, but because of a rampant alcoholism often framed as innate to the Eastern European condition—an assertion that taints capitalism’s systematic erosion of lives with individualized moral judgment and an air of civilizational haughtiness. Women were sold into slavery not because imperialism commodifies the body and criminality takes root in the crevices of a crumbling society, but because the United States had not yet won its war on trafficking⁴—an assertion that recasts villain as saviour. These narratives then yield “policy recommendations” that demand further liberalization to undo the “inefficiencies” supposedly inherent in socialist planning. The nation, the community, and, ultimately, the individual, have to be destroyed again and again to eradicate their impulse for sovereignty. Through these processes, the threads of capitalism are woven ever more firmly into the social and economic fabric, establishing capitalist social relations as a totalizing force.

The normative discourse about the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe also ignores its impact on the structures of accumulation—and the forces of resistance—globally. It ignores the role of the Soviet Union and the socialist states of Eastern Europe in backing processes of national liberation and the construction of political sovereignty across the Third World, while holding back the worst excesses of imperial violence.⁵ Since the collapse of the USSR, wages fell globally⁶, access to food declined, and global labor reserves exploded.⁷ The instruments of imperial and neo-colonial domination—from sanctions to dollarization, debt to financialization—subordinated ever-greater parts of the Third World.⁸ The story of Eastern Europe’s supposed “liberation” is a story in which the flood-gates of neo-colonial subjugation opened far and wide, unleashing a torrent of exploitation with potentially terminal consequences for the planet—the violence and destruction inherent

in the process of accumulation now threaten to extinguish the majority of life on earth, whether through climate and environmental breakdown or nuclear war.

It is essential to yank the history of Eastern European socialism's collapse from the bourgeois framing in which it has been trapped. Indeed, the destruction of the socialist projects of Eastern Europe was a deliberate and long-standing goal of United States foreign policy. Its victory not only dismantled an advanced safety net that kept hundreds of millions of lives afloat. It also cut a critical lifeline for nations and peoples struggling under imperialist dependency and colonial domination. A generation that defeated German Nazism and, as Soviet poet Nikolai Mayorov wrote, “rendered the word ‘humanity’ into flesh”, saw its own humanity torn from the body of the societies that it constructed and defended. Millions died as a result, hundreds of millions more were condemned to lives of violent deprivation, and billions were denied a political horizon that had promised them liberation. Seen from outside the West, the fall was nothing short of catastrophic—a historic setback in the centuries-long struggle for liberation.

The millions of lives lost matter not only in their own right, but also because they contradict the conventional, Western understanding of 20th century political economy. In Eastern Europe, we witnessed not a “crisis of transition”, but a terrible truncating of human life as land, labor and resources were conscripted to feed the rapacious appetites of national oligarchies and, ultimately, the imperial metropolises. Far from liberation, this period echoes the familiar dynamic of the colonial genocide, effected in Eastern Europe by contemporary technologies of accumulation. This was not the colonialism that stole land, appointed rulers, and mowed down those who resisted it—a politics that found its terminus in the concentration camp or killing field. This was an engine of neoliberal control, whose pistons included structural adjustment, privatization, financial dependency, and ideological engineering. Despite their veneer of economic rationality, the effects of these assaults were no less lethal than bombs. Between 1991 and 2019, nearly seventeen million people died as a consequence of capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe—deaths that were not accidental but structural, not incidental but necessary for the reinsertion of these territories into the global system of accumulation. In the 1990s, the former socialist states of Eastern Europe were subject to a neoliberal holocaust—and the pages of that story have been torn from our history books.

1. Previous research put the figure at seven million, see e.g., Gábor Scheiring et al. “Deindustrialisation and the post-socialist mortality crisis,” *Cambridge*

Journal of Economics 47, no. 3. 2023. New, unpublished research carried out by Bineh Ndefru, Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan indicates 16.9 million excess deaths in the former Eastern Bloc after 1990, compared with the trajectory of the 1980s.

2. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1977.

3. For examples of the tendency of bourgeois economists to downplay or deny the scale of the suffering, see, e.g., Gábor Scheiring and Lawrence King, “Deindustrialization, social disintegration, and health: a neoclassical sociological approach”, *Theory and Society* 52, 2023: 148-149.

4. See, e.g., Mary Buckley, “Human Trafficking in the Twenty-First Century,” in Linda Racioppi and Katherine O’Sullivan (eds.), *Gender Politics in Post-Communist Eurasia*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

5. According to data compiled by the U.S. Congressional Research Service, some 80 percent of U.S. military interventions after 1946 took place after the fall of the USSR. Barbara S. Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2022,” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022).

6. Utsa Patnaik, *The Republic of Hunger and Other Essays*, (Merlin Press, 2007).

7. Paris Yeros, “Generalized Semiproletarianization in Africa”, *The Indian Economic Journal* 71, no. 1. 2023: 162-186.

8. Paris Yeros, “A Polycentric World Will Only Be Possible by the Intervention of the ‘Sixth Great Power’”, *Agrarian South Journal of Political Economy: A triannual Journal of Agrarian South Network and CARES* 13, no. 1. 2024:14-40.

CAPITALISM'S DOUBLE VIOLENCE

How do we make sense of the systemic violence that grips societies, violence often veiled by attributions to the metaphysical, to “human nature”? In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels studied the circumstances of life in the early English industrialized economy. The advent of mass manufacturing tore apart the structures of feudal society and centralized ownership in the hands of the rising bourgeoisie. The large factories established to sustain the boom in production also centralized population centers, as peasants and small manufacturers were forced into increasingly congested cities in search of work. The more workers there were, the lower the wages that the capitalists would pay. So, as they grew, English cities became sites of both obscene wealth and crippling poverty.¹ “The East End of London,” Engels wrote, “is an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work.”²

The English ruling class waged “a social war” on the workers. Parents would work from before dawn until after dusk, leaving children and infants to fend for themselves. Lacking access to healthcare, they fell prey to companies peddling “miracle cures”. To calm their children, workers would give them pills laced with opium, which, unbeknownst to them, slowly extinguished their lives. Sickness was rampant. Lung disease from the poisoned air, typhus, scarlet fever, food poisoning, tuberculosis, and scores of other ailments tore through communities. The squalid, high-density homes they lived in meant that many workers burned to death in house fires. Crime rose as the wretchedness deepened. Alcoholism, suicide, and other “deaths of despair” were commonplace. In Liverpool in the mid-1800s, the death rate approached 3,344 per 100,000 people, more than ten times what it is today. For the workers of 19th century England, life was an uninterrupted tragedy that reproduced itself with each waking day.

Engels sought to make sense of the obscene mortality produced by this system—deaths caused not by the firing of a gun, the dropping of a bomb, or the slitting of the throat, but by the creation of social conditions that cut lives short. The workers of England called it “social murder”, a concept that Engels described in this widely-cited passage:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one...

This passage reflects a dual charge. It condemns the state of affairs in which one of the wealthiest empires in history puts its working class in conditions so dire that they “inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death”. In question was not just the fact of the death, but its structural character—each death bookends a continuum of oppression that extends from the rural enclosure to the urban gutter; the factory floor to the booze house. It reflects conditions in which labor reserves became so large as to be expendable; workers could always be replaced by the armies of the unemployed roaming the city streets. Their maintenance threatened to eat into profits. But Engels also decries the ways in which the structural character of the violence shields it from view: “no man sees the murderer” and “the death of the victim seems a natural one”. Engels observed that Britain’s ruling class did not and could not acknowledge the violence it imposed; it simply erased the victims from the historical record. The ruling class, Engels wrote, “will not confess, even to itself, that the workers are in distress, because it, the property-holding, manufacturing class, must bear the moral responsibility for this distress.”³ Thus, the ongoing, murderous violence of capitalism is kept from the pages of history.

When we study history, we study the history of a particular class. The prevailing historiography of feudalism traces the exchange of thrones, not the heartbeats of the people who fed and clothed the princes and landlords. The history of the early capitalist slave economies begins with the intrepid explorer traversing the Atlantic on his carrack, not the enslaved human beings dying in torment in the fetid belly of the ship. And the history of capitalism is a story of bold entrepreneurs, not those who toil to produce their wealth. Because attributions of criminality and victimhood are the prerogative of the dominating class, its history does not accommodate the stories of the oppressed and their resistance. Since the ruling class dominates

in the spheres of publishing, education, journalism, and other forms of knowledge production, their material power translates into a hold over our structures of thought. Material inequality becomes an inequality of consciousness—both by limiting the education of the oppressed, and by limiting the production of knowledge about the oppressed. In a sense, then, social murder implies a double death: as life is extinguished, so is memory.

This dynamic—shaped within nations by class oppression and class struggle—also plays out across the entire social, cultural, and economic topography of our planet. Imperialism steamrolls across the periphery—from North to South, West to East—leeching its resources and crushing its lives. In the process, the inequalities of class within the nation state translate into inequalities between nation states, producing prosperity for some and great immiseration for others. As in the streets of Engels’ Manchester, global labor reserves are growing at catastrophic rates, and workers around the planet are becoming expendable. Karl Marx predicted that capitalism would ultimately sap “the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the laborer.”⁴ Today, the imperative to generate ever-greater profit sees capital devalue both human life and nature to the point of their systematic destruction. That process itself imparts greater returns for capitalists at every stage in the value chain; for example, the early death of a worker removes the need to pay her pension or healthcare costs and increases the surplus that can be extracted over her truncated lifetime.⁵

The deprivation caused by capitalism is staggering. Over two billion people live in conditions of food insecurity. Over three billion cannot afford to eat well and just as many people do not have access to a stove. Nearly four billion do not have safe sanitation facilities and as many as five billion lack access to basic health services.⁶ If structural violence is innate in the capitalist process, then capitalism as a whole cannot be exempted from charges of genocide. Every year, five million people in underdeveloped nations die because they lack access to quality healthcare.⁷ Every year, nine million people die from hunger and food-related diseases. Every year, one million people die from diarrhea caused by a lack of access to clean water and sanitation.⁸ Every year, 100,000 people die from homelessness and inadequate housing in Europe alone. UNICEF estimates that 69 million children will die from poverty, disease, and other causes by 2030. Globally, nearly 50 million human beings are enslaved.⁹ As Garry Leech has argued, capitalism “results in death on a genocidal scale, thereby constituting a class-based genocide that targets the poor, particularly in the global south.”¹⁰

Within the imperialist system, structural violence is not only innate—that is, it is not only the passive residue of structures of accumulation. Instead, the violence serves a purpose: to eliminate those who lack productive utility or

pose a threat to accumulation.¹¹ That structural violence, in turn, is backstopped by the violence of bombs and bullets. Since World War II, imperialism has launched dozens upon dozens of such assaults, claiming well over 20 million lives in the process; the genocide in Gaza is just the latest testing ground for imperialism's strategies of control and its toolkit of destatization, de-development, destabilization, and income deflation.¹² These assaults represent the North-South axis in imperialism's unconsummated "cold" war against the revolutionary projects in the East, which emerged with the revolutions in Russia and China.¹³ Unable to win in direct confrontation against the nuclear-armed socialist powers, imperialism struck at the foundations of sovereignty in nations across the South. The combined body count of the structural violence and its enforcement—numbering in the hundreds of millions of people—represents the sordid, unspeakable toll of the capitalist and imperialist

world system, an ongoing structural genocide that the climate crisis accelerates and nuclear warfare threatens to totalize.

Like the ruling class of Victorian Britain, the imperialist ruling class erases both the victims of its crimes and the successes of its adversaries from the historical record. Liberalism mobilizes tremendous intellectual capacity not only to ignore the death toll, but to bury its victims beneath narratives of triumph. The academy sets boundaries on the appropriate spheres of intellectual inquiry, policing the thresholds of thought on what constitutes appropriate strategies of political and economic liberation. The NGO circuit and philanthropic world repeat grotesque distortions about capitalism's effects on poverty, women's emancipation, literacy, and education. The contributions of socialism to these metrics is ignored, and no socialist country is given the benefit of being judged in relation to its own historical inheritance. Cuba is compared to Florida, not to Haiti, although both were birthed in the hellfire of colonial genocide and slavery and only Cuba has emerged as a sustainable state with universal healthcare. But it was precisely the socialist world that stood most powerfully against capitalism's war on life—and on memory.

1. Friedrich Engels, "The Industrial Proletariat", Condition of the Working Class in England. 1845.

2. Ibid., "Introduction".

3. Ibid.

4. Ali Kadri, *The Accumulation of Waste: A political economy of systemic*

destruction, (BRILL, 2023).

5. Ibid., p. 268.

6. Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan, “Capitalism, Global Poverty, and the Case for Democratic Socialism,” *Monthly Review* 75, no. 3. 2023: 104.

7. Margaret Kruk et al., “Mortality due to low-quality health systems in the universal health coverage era: a systematic analysis of amenable deaths in 137 countries,” *The Lancet* 392, no. 10160. 2018: 2203—2212.

8. World Health Organization, “Drinking-water”.

9. Walk Free, International Labor Organization, and International Organization for Migration. “Global Estimates of Modern Slavery”. 2022.

10. Garry Leech, *Capitalism: A Structural Genocide*, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012).

11. Ali Kadri, *The Accumulation of Waste*.

12. Max Ajl, “Palestine’s Great Flood: Part I? Agrarian South: *Journal of Political Economy* 13, no. 1.2024: 62-88.

13. Pawel Wargan, “NATO and the Long War on the Third World.” *Monthly Review* 74, no. 8. 2023.

SOCIALISM AS ANTIDOTE

Yet the slightest attention and thought will suffice to satisfy anyone that the ways of combating catastrophe and famine are available, that the measures required to combat them are quite clear, simple, perfectly feasible, and fully within reach of the people's forces, and that these measures are not being adopted only because, exclusively because, their realisation would affect the fabulous profits of a handful of landowners and capitalists.

— VLADIMIR I. LENIN

From the Soviet Union to the People's Republic of China, processes of socialist construction largely eliminated the indignities that condemn large parts of humanity to an early grave: hunger, unemployment, sickness, homelessness, and poverty. At the national scale, this is because the socialist process involves a fundamental reorientation of the way that we relate to the economy. Capitalism is characterized by the dominance of exchange-value over use-value. The nature of what is produced does not matter. What matters is its capacity to generate profit for those who own the means of production. The profit motive demands not only ever-greater production, but the siphoning of ever-greater portions of public wealth to the private sector through privatization and austerity. The value generated by workers above what they are paid is extracted by the capitalists. By privileging use-value over exchange-value and removing the profit motive from the equations of economic governance, revolutionary forces are able to direct the income generated above the cost of wages toward expanding productive capacity, funding public welfare, and administering and defending the state.

The effects—despite the extreme state of exception imposed on every socialist project—were clear. In the Soviet Union, life expectancy rose from roughly 27 years in 1917, the year of the October Revolution, to over 58 years in 1955, the year after Josef Stalin's death. By 1983, the US Central Intelligence Agency noted that caloric intake in the Soviet Union caught up to that of the United States, with the Soviet diet being more nutritious.¹ Across the Eastern Bloc, homelessness and unemployment were largely eradicated. The decades-long process that began with the 1949 Chinese Revolution saw China lift 850 million people out of extreme poverty,

accounting for the vast majority of global poverty reduction efforts.² Despite a crippling blockade that has severely stunted its development, Cuba has some of the highest social development indicators in one of the world's most overexploited regions.³ The images of stocked supermarkets so cheaply wielded by the United States and other Western countries in their anti-communist propaganda say very little about the capacity of ordinary people to buy what is on offer. Today, there is widespread hunger in the United States despite the abundance paraded before its adversaries.⁴

The transition to a socialized economic model where distributive concerns are not bound by the imperative of private capital accumulation enables the emergence of a much more expansive set of social claims. Even though the West has sought to center formal civil liberties in its ideological war against communism, it was the socialist bloc that most forcefully advanced the struggle for human rights, advocating for social and economic rights as collective human rights. From 1936, the Soviet constitution contained explicit guarantees of the right to work, leisure, social services, and education, as well as equality guarantees for women, along with political and personal freedoms. Underpinning the new legal order was the notion that emancipation was not a question of individual advancement but of class advancement.⁵ As the Polish-American sociologist Albert Szymanski writes in his seminal work, *Human Rights in the Soviet Union*, this is because there is a fundamental contradiction between the *right to own productive property* and the *right to employ the labor power of others in productive property*. The exercise of the latter right necessarily concentrates productive property in the hands of a minority, proletarianizing the majority of society and producing unequal distributive outcomes. In this way, the class basis of a society determines the claims that its constituents can make against the state and each other.⁶ Capitalism, as even bourgeois intellectuals have acknowledged, is *fundamentally* incompatible with guarantees of collective rights. The rights that can be demanded of a state are necessarily constrained by the relations of production and the balance of class power within that state.

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was being drafted, it was the USSR that pushed for greater emphasis on these collective social and economic rights. Through Soviet efforts, the UDHR came to enshrine the rights to work (Article 23), rest (Article 24), an adequate standard of living (Article 25) and education (Article 26); and the right “to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (Article 27). The Soviet Union argued that the rights contained in the UDHR should be supported by positive guarantees from the state, ensuring, for example, that “death out of hunger is prevented”, or that the guarantee of press freedom should be

backed by the provision of necessary equipment and resourcing because material inequalities distort the exercise of rights.⁷ The bourgeois economist Friedrich Hayek criticized such provisions as paving the road towards forms of social organization that are “totalitarian in the fullest sense of the word.”⁸ Underlying his critique was the correct recognition that the positive guarantee of fundamental dignities by the state *requires* the socialization of production—that is, it requires mounting a fundamental and *total* challenge to the right to own productive property and exploit others for individual gain. This is a class position: “totalizing” fair distributive outcomes undoes the rule of profit. For capitalists, such measures will no doubt have a “totalitarian” flavor, because they challenge the very basis of their existence *as exploiters*.

If socialist development ensured a fairer distributive system at home, it also pursued policies to advance it globally. The principle of internationalism—the extension of class struggle to the international terrain—colored the foreign policies of the socialist world and helped counterveil the logic of imperialist dependency that gripped the nations of the South. From the People’s Republic of Poland to Cuba, universities were established to help prepare the peoples of the South to address the urgent needs of development. The German Democratic Republic trained—free of charge—between 64,000 and 78,000 medical students from over 125 countries between 1951 and 1989. In doing so, it actively limited the “brain drain” caused by the poaching of medical personnel by imperialist countries.⁹ Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine has taught 30,878 doctors from 122 countries¹⁰ in a program that is qualitatively different from medical schools in capitalist countries, focusing on holistic, community-based, preventative healthcare rather than profiteering. Through a commitment to health internationalism, Cuba has dispatched 605,000 health professionals and technicians to 165 countries,¹¹ bringing health to as many nations as the United States has sanctioned¹²—and its literacy program continues to achieve world-historic gains in nations stunted by imperialism.

The socialist bloc sent builders, architects, and urban planners to nations emerging from colonial rule. They designed and built industrial plants, infrastructure, land-reclamation projects, housing, hospitals, schools, universities, and public buildings. In Ghana, the government of Kwame Nkrumah invited architects from across Eastern Europe to the country. They would study traditional Ghanaian architecture and work alongside Ghanaian architects and builders to advance the underdeveloped nation towards modernity, leaving marvels of national architecture as their legacy, alongside schools to prepare new cadres of architects. In 1973, Poland’s Miastoprojekt and Budimex—public urban planning and construction firms—developed a master plan for the urban development of Baghdad, charting a path until the

year 2000.¹³ These are two examples of many. Nkrumah would be deposed by the United States and the gains made by his government were dramatically rolled back. Later, Iraq would be destroyed by the United States with Poland colluding as a junior member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. We decimated the same cities we once helped build. And, in a tragic denouement of our internationalist legacy, in 2022 Budimex completed the construction of a border wall to stop the victims of imperial aggression from crossing into Europe.

Imperialism, Samir Amin wrote, marches on two legs: the economic leg of globalized neoliberalism and the political leg of intervention, including preemptive wars.¹⁴ It has to be resisted on both fronts. That is why the most consequential contribution of the socialist bloc to the internationalist struggle was the underwriting of the armed struggles and defensive capacities of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial forces globally. It was with the help of Soviet arms—and Cuban troops—that the wars of liberation in Angola and Mozambique were won, defeating the apartheid regime in South Africa. It was the People's Republic of China that, reeling from its own protracted civil war, helped push United States' forces past the 38th parallel in Korea, preventing the fall of the entire peninsula to imperialism. The Soviet Union armed revolutionary Cuba and Vietnam, and helped build up military power in the Arab region as it confronted increasing Zionist belligerence. In this way, socialism came to undergird movements towards national liberation that swept the Third World, generating a defensive and offensive bulwark against imperialist accumulation globally. That is why the wars waged against national sovereignty in the Third World also served to chisel away at the broader project of global socialism—they curtailed the space within which sovereignty could be exercised.

The imperialist centers themselves would be reshaped by these processes. The social democratic compact did not emerge in a vacuum—it was powered by rising communist movements that had the USSR as their guiding light. From the New Deal to the post-war consensus, the threat of communist revolutions in the United States and Western Europe saw the ruling classes make unprecedented concessions to the workers of their countries, adopting high taxes, curtailing the power of monopolies, and embarking on major public works projects. This social-democratic compact was combined with unprecedented levels of anti-communist action. In the United States, the McCarthyist terror, the radicalization of policing and the emergence of mass incarceration, the assassination of opposition forces, and the demobilization and marginalization of the radical working class through instruments like the AFL-CIO was the stick to the carrot of the untrammelled consumption that came to underpin the so-called “American Dream”. In Europe, socialism was contained in the East; fascism strangled budding liberation movements in

the South (primarily in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece); and US troops and nuclear weapons, deployed permanently on the continent, maintained tensions that could not allow alternative political projects to emerge and flourish. NATO not only secured the anti-communist consensus, but also helped power the West European colonial wars in Africa that fed the ruling class back home. The Marshall Plan, Truman Doctrine, and the gradual consolidation of the European capitalist class under what would become the European Union laid the ground for a fragile—and heavily policed—social-democratic consensus that persisted until its internal contradictions began to tear it apart. It is no coincidence that the gains of the post-war period began to unwind during the denouement of Soviet power.

In a stunning reversal, the lodestars of social progress, which once held promise for the workers of the imperialist heartlands, came to be judged by the obscene standards of consumption of their adversaries. These new ideas began to wear down the social contracts established under socialism. By the 1980s, peoples across large parts of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe wanted their Levi's and McDonald's. It is perhaps Eastern European socialism's greatest failure that they were not able to see the other side of the bargain: healthcare, housing, education, and the promise of dignified employment. Or that they only saw it once it was too late to turn back the clock.

1. CIA Reading Room.
2. Li Xiaoyun, "Pro-Poor Development — How China Eradicated Poverty." Progressive International Blueprint (3 January 2024).
3. Jason Hickel's Sustainable Development Index, which measures human development against ecological overshoot, has found Cuba to be the most sustainably developed country in the world. See, e.g., Matt Trinder, "We would need multiple Earths to sustain that kind of consumption", Morning Star (24 January 2020).
4. Hunger in America. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>
5. Anna Lukina. "Soviet Union and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", Max Planck Institute for European Legal History Research Paper Series No. 2017-01, p. 4.
6. Albert Szymanski, *Human Rights in the Soviet Union*, Zed Books Ltd (1984).
7. Lukina, p. 11.

8. Alice Malone. "Concessions", *Red Sails* (1 January 2008).
9. IFDDR, "Reconstruction, sovereignty, and education: An East German medical school dedicated to internationalism."
10. Cuba MinRex, "The Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) and the Medical Studies program in Cuba have been internationally accredited for 6 years", 25 January 2024.
11. Cuba MinRex, "Cuba celebrates 60 years of international medical cooperation", 23 May 2023.
12. Ben Norton, "Economic world war: US has sanctions on 1/3rd of all countries, 60% of poor nations", Geopolitical Economy Report (28 August 2024).
13. Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*, Princeton University Press, 2020.
14. Samir Amin, "Contemporary Imperialism", *Monthly Review* (2015).

THE CAPTURE OF EASTERN EUROPE

The collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe represented not only a transformation of domestic political economies. It represented, primarily, the cancerous extension of the mode of imperial accumulation into territories that had until then been closed to it. As socialism crumbled, its productive capacities, natural resources, labor, and markets were subordinated to Western capital. This transformation threaded through the entire social tapestry. Structural adjustment, privatization, the drain of minds and bodies into Western labor markets, and the integration of Eastern European economies into global value chains on disadvantageous terms sapped the former socialist economies of their productive capacities. Consumerist propaganda, changes to educational curricula, and the financing of media institutions helped establish the ideological scaffolding for the assault. In this way, the ideological and material wars threaded through each other, working to establish capitalism as the only political possibility.

We can recognize elements here in what Kwame Nkrumah described as neocolonialism, a form of control enforced not at the barrel of a gun—although the gun always remains as its backstop—but through a complex matrix of economic penetration, political manipulation, and cultural hegemony.¹ Under neocolonialism, a state may appear nominally independent within the framework of international law, while its substantive economic sovereignty is subordinated to imperialist interests and directed by transnational frameworks established to serve imperialism. But there was something more at work in the process of transition in Eastern Europe. If neocolonialism is antecedent to revolution—arriving as a set of counterrevolutionary technologies designed to curtail the transformation of formal political liberation into economic sovereignty—the assault on the Soviet Union involved the rapid construction of new economic and political institutions on the ashes of old ones. It represented a process of imperialist capture.

The economic transformation was cooked up in institutions like the Harvard Institute for International Development, which received tens of millions of

dollars from USAID—and managed hundreds of millions more in grant money—to advise Eastern Bloc countries on their “transition”. It was advanced through conditionalities imposed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and international trade agreements. These required states to open their economies to foreign investment, reduce trade barriers, and sell state assets to private (largely foreign) investors. The productive assets built up over decades of socialist development were chopped and diced and absorbed by capital—a process representing the largest upward transfer of wealth in human history. The result was a form of dependent development remarkably similar to that experienced by Third World countries under neo-colonialism. Economies that had been underpinned by robust supply chains and industries transformed into ones designed to siphon resources up, towards the national bourgeoisie, and out, primarily to Wall Street.

Former socialist economies were restructured to serve as sources of raw materials, cheap labor, and markets for Western goods rather than as sites of autonomous development. In Poland, for example, foreign capital came to control 70% of the banking sector, 60% of industry, and 30% of land by the early 2000s.² In Russia, some 14,000 enterprises were privatized between 1992 and 1994—roughly 70% of the country’s industry—with state assets worth billions sold for millions;³ inflation in 1992 reached 2,520 percent, effectively nullifying the financial reserves of ordinary citizens;⁴ and real government spending on healthcare declined by 57 percent between 1989 and 1996.⁵ This pattern was repeated across the region. Public budgets were slashed, foreign capital captured the most profitable sectors of the economy, and declining industries were left in public hands to help reinforce the case for the inefficiency of public ownership. In Russia, an economy underpinned by planned industrialization transformed overnight into an economy based on rents from oil, gas and other resources—a transition that no longer accommodated an expansive workforce, producing an explosion in labor reserves.⁶

The political dimension of the assault on Eastern Europe was reflected in the fundamental lack of a popular mandate for the changes. No one would have voted for the reforms, knowing the misery they would bring about, and so “shock therapy” was carried out by decree. In Poland, Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz implemented his “Balcerowicz Plan” in January 1990, nearly two years before the first full parliamentary election was held. In Russia, the economic reforms were so unpopular that former First Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais—the nation’s shock therapist-in-chief—had them implemented by presidential decree rather than parliamentary mandate. These processes were driven by multiple technologies of control: regime change operations in the case of countries like Georgia and Ukraine, war in the case of Yugoslavia, and accession to transnational institutions like

the European Union and NATO in the case of large parts of Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltics. These latter countries were absorbed into the imperialist bloc, stabilized through heavy subsidies, and ultimately turned against states that followed a different political and economic trajectory. In different ways, competencies that had been the prerogative of nation states—existential questions of economic governance and war and peace—were removed from the sphere of national politics across large parts of the Eastern Bloc.

This economic and political control was accompanied by an “epistemological imperialism”—the imposition of Western economic theories and models that delegitimized alternative development paths. Leading economists from Harvard, MIT, and other prestigious institutions descended on Eastern Europe as consultants, bringing with them neoclassical economic paradigms that presented market fundamentalism as scientific truth rather than ideological

preference. These “missionaries of capitalism” operated with remarkable arrogance, dismissing local knowledge and concerns while implementing policies based on abstract models with little regard for social consequences.⁷ The ideological assault extended to education. After the German Democratic Republic was annexed by West Germany, one of the very first “transition measures” taken was the dissolution of every Marxist-Leninist institute and university department and the expulsion or reassignment of their staff. This was justified as part of a process of the “enforcement of freedom... and associated de-ideologization” in natural and technical sciences.⁸ Across the former Eastern Bloc, university reform programs sponsored by foundations like the Soros Open Society Institute systematically reoriented humanities and social science disciplines toward Western liberalism, effectively colonizing intellectual production. US institutions like USAID and the National Endowment for democracy acquired ever-greater control of the media. In Ukraine, nine out of ten media outlets would be funded by the US—a reality revealed by Donald Trump’s withdrawal of funding in 2025.

This imperial restructuring produced a form of “uneven and combined development” where islands of Western-style prosperity (typically in capital cities) existed alongside vast zones of deindustrialization and impoverishment. The result was what sociologist Göran Therborn described as “a new European periphery”⁹: abandoned regions struck by economic dependency, demographic decline, and political marginalization, tinder for political reaction. The human costs of this process—measured in millions of excess deaths—represent not collateral damage but the necessary outcome of an imperial project designed to subordinate both populations and resources to the imperatives of capital accumulation.

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8. See the German "The Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship": "Hoch- und Fachschulwesen", Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur. Incidentally, the West-German officials tasked with implementing capitalist policies in East Germany were paid what was called a *Buschzulage*, which roughly translates as "jungle bonus". The neo-colonization of Eastern Europe carried with it the same civilizational overtones as the assault on the broader Global South.
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THE COLLAPSE

In the early months of 2007, a dog chanced upon the remains of over 30 young women and girls—some as young as 13—systematically murdered by sexual traffickers between 2002 and 2005 and buried in a mass grave. The discovery helped solve some of the over 400 missing persons cases in the industrial city of Nizhny Tagil in Russia. It marked one of the more explicit manifestations of a new economic order in which labor—now dramatically proletarianized—became terrain for capital’s most ruthless strategies of accumulation and waste. Social protections dissolved, criminality took root, and the vulnerable became objects of commodification and violence on a scale not seen since the social deprivations of empire and world war.

This gruesome story offers a particularity that concretizes what is otherwise an ocean of statistics and figures. The fall of the socialist projects in Eastern Europe produced suffering on a scale never seen in peacetime. In Russia, GDP plummeted by 40 percent. The country’s industrial inputs fell by half. Real wages dropped to half of their 1987 levels. Poverty ballooned from two percent of the population to 50 percent in just over five years.¹ In those same years, life expectancy in Russia declined by up to seven years for men and about three years for women.² In the Baltic states, it declined by an average of four years. In Hungary, death rates reached levels unseen since the Great Depression.³ Fertility rates plummeted to levels not seen since world war.⁴ In that time, sexual predation was rife. Countless children were forced into prostitution, and half a million Russian women were trafficked into sexual slavery.⁵ Recent research shows that there were 16.9 million excess deaths from 1991 to 2019⁶ as a result of the wretchedness imposed on the states of the former Eastern European socialist bloc, a period that constitutes the largest mortality crisis outside war or famine in history.⁷

As in Engels’ time, vice crept into the social body of these states. Alcoholism became rampant, as were attempts to attribute it to something innate in the Eastern European condition—something primitive, oriental, in need of civilizing. Westerners arrived in Ukraine and Russia in search of the Slavic “soul”, pursuits that often veiled more predatory motives. But, as in Victorian England, the drinking was a product of despair and alienation. “Drunkenness has here ceased to be a vice, for which the vicious can be held responsible,”

Engels wrote: it becomes a phenomenon, the necessary, inevitable effect of certain conditions upon an object possessed of no volition in relation to those conditions. His enfeebled frame, weakened by bad air and bad food, violently demands some external stimulus; his social need can be gratified only in the public-house, he has absolutely no other place where he can meet his friends. How can he be expected to resist the temptation?

As in Engels' time, the collapse of state healthcare saw pseudo-sciences flood markets unaccustomed to capital's capacity for deceit. Everyone who grew up in the Eastern Europe of the 1990s—from Poland's Gdańsk to Russia's Vladivostok—will remember the wróżba or kolduniya, the fortune-teller who, for a few złoty or roubles, revealed the secrets of longevity. In the streets, peddlers sold stones or crystals imbued with healing properties, or self-published guides on Radiesthesia, the power to detect radiation emanating from objects both living and inanimate. In Russia, mysticism swept through the population, with televised shows promising miracle cures for the ill and prosperity for the poor. The spread of mysticism also carried a more explicitly political dimension. In Poland, the Catholic Church won tremendous political influence and, working against popular opposition, began to lobby for the unwinding of the Polish People's Republic's laws on abortion. In 1993, Poland unrolled a socialist-era law that allowed for abortions even in case of economic hardship—until then, the most progressive abortion legislation in the world. By 2021, abortion would be outlawed in nearly all cases.

As in Engels' time, deaths were commonplace. In the 1990s, hunger in Russia reached levels unseen since the post-war famine in 1947, and the death rate far exceeded the combined rate from post-war malnutrition and that of prisoners in the Soviet labor and detention camp system in the last years of Joseph Stalin's administration⁸—a period whose purported excesses continue to be weaponised against the socialist system as a whole. That is, capitalist restoration killed more people than what is often elevated by imperialist ideologues as socialism's darkest hour. In 15 years after the collapse of socialism, Russia lost more lives than it did during the entirety of World War I,⁹ and almost as many civilians as were killed in World War II. Capitalist restoration killed around twice as many people as the famine that swept Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other parts of the Soviet Union in 1930-1933. The figure is worth repeating: The protracted crisis of mortality, lasting well into the 2000s, killed nearly seventeen million people in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe.

A comprehensive study into the causes of the deaths in the region established that the mortality rates were directly correlated with the extent of privatization. Radical privatization caused a 13-21% spike in mortality

rates,¹⁰ a pattern that was repeated across 22 countries in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1994.¹¹ Countries that implemented privatization more gradually, such as Belarus and Slovenia, experienced significantly lower increases in mortality. Research carried out in *The Lancet* conclusively demonstrated that “rapid mass privatization as an economic transition strategy was a crucial determinant of differences in adult mortality trends in post-communist countries.”¹² It is worth noting here that the very same agenda persists today, despite the collapse of socialism and the mounting evidence of the violence that capitalist restoration imposed. During the failed regime change attempt in Belarus in 2021, a European Parliament resolution expressed “regret” that the Belarusian authorities failed to follow World Bank and IMF recommendations to privatize the state sector, implement austerity, and “encourage entrepreneurship”. The resolution expressed “concern” that state regulations were hostile to the private sector, “particularly the requirement to pay a minimum wage not lower than the average wage of the ten most successful state-owned enterprises.”¹³ This is the Malthusian fine print of regime change, targeting a state that had not sufficiently been brought to its knees.

The imperative to dismantle the socialist welfare state—or its remnants—is not an unfortunate side effect but a necessary precondition for the enforcement of capitalist social relations and imperialist dependence. As Marx observed in his analysis of primitive accumulation, the creation of a proletarian class requires the forcible separation of people from their means of subsistence.¹⁴ In post-socialist Eastern Europe, this process did not involve the enclosure of common lands but the dismantling of public services—enclosing the social commons that had sustained large industrial workforces. Housing, health care, catering, daycare, and paid holidays for the working class—once guaranteed—vanished overnight. The collective rights enshrined under socialist law were replaced by the rights of private accumulation. Unemployment ballooned, and with it came an avalanche of alcoholism, suicide, heart disease, and murder.¹⁵ A study conducted in Hungary linked the loss of worker control in the workplace, increasing workloads on weekends, and the threat of unemployment to significant increases in cardiovascular mortality.¹⁶ One study observed that the “age distribution and the upstream role of stress, inability to cope with stress, and despair are comparable to the North American deaths of despair epidemic.”¹⁷ With the collapse of the socialist state system, the ailments of US capitalism—until then, largely unheard of in the advanced socialist bloc—had arrived in Eastern Europe with full force.

With the economic dislocation came the social fragmentation of the “national solidarity community”.¹⁸ The integration of socialist states into the global capitalist economy widened the gap between the working person and the

liberal elites that gained access to international capital. This was not just an economic gap. In Hungary, for example, there emerged a 17 percent difference in mortality rates between men without a secondary education and those with a university degree.¹⁹ In Russia, the mortality rate for men with university education increased by 3-7 percent between 1980 and 2001, while for men with elementary education, it increased by 57 percent.²⁰ This disparity exposes how the violence of capitalist restoration fell most heavily on the working class and rural populations—precisely those groups that had benefited most under socialism.

The catastrophe also had a geographic dimension: the concentration of capital and investment in the urban centers saw the emergence and widening of regional disparities. Research conducted in Hungary showed how the privatizations and the resulting hardship and loss of control violated a long-standing social contract and became the tinder for the emergence of political reaction, which filled the gap left by the dismantling of socialism and provided working people with new social and economic narratives.²¹ From the Caucasus to Ukraine, these reactionary forces became instruments of imperialist expansion, which set about engineering ethnic strife in a bid to divide the region, absorb it into transnational structures, and ultimately gain access to its mineral wealth—policies whose consequences are now claiming hundreds of thousands of lives on the battlefield

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POSTSCRIPT ON TWO KINDS OF VIOLENCE

Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarność and later Polish President, once said that his movement succeeded in overthrowing socialism without throwing a single brick or breaking a single window. In response, the US historian Michael Parenti later quipped that “maybe that says more about the socialists than it does about Wałęsa.” In hindsight, given the world-historic stakes at play, it is remarkable how little violence was deployed to try to keep the socialist system afloat. Compare the fall of the states in the socialist Eastern Bloc with the violence imposed on projects seeking to overcome capitalism and colonialism: tens of millions of lives brutally cut short, nations destroyed. Colonialism and capitalism collapse with the hellfire of the oppressor’s violence and the rage of the oppressed’s resistance. Socialism, it appears, simply falls.

How do we understand this dialectic of violence? Who produces the terrain of violence? Who invades and plunders and enslaves? Who imposed and imposes conditions so dire that millions die each year silently and without ceremony? Who deploys the drones and bunker busters that sustain this deathly condition? Many within the ranks of the left remain afflicted by what Domenico Losurdo described as the “self-flagellation of the vanquished”—a tendency to condemn ourselves for our past, which hinders our capacity to soberly assess the question of violence. We apologise for socialism. We apologise for struggles against colonialism. We remain on the back foot. But socialist violence is always defined by the terrains chosen for it by imperialism. Nelson Mandela once said that “[a] freedom fighter learns the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor.”

In fact, socialism did not simply fall—and it did not fall peacefully. The violence of capitalist restoration was systematic and total. It entailed not merely the destruction of human lives but the annihilation of the social fabric itself. The nearly seventeen million dead across Eastern Europe were not casualties of a violent overthrow but victims of a project to unseat working

people from political power—a process that produced a calamitous collapse of accumulation and dragged every social support system down with it. The neoliberal architects of this catastrophe understood clearly that rapid privatization would result in massive social dislocation. They proceeded regardless, viewing these deaths as the acceptable price of “market reform.” There is no single policy to which the death toll can be attributed or one moment to which it can be traced. The violence imposed on the peoples of the former Soviet Union and the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe was structural. It was normalized and then obscured by an ideological apparatus installed to discredit and erase the socialist past.

I use the term “holocaust”—provocatively, but deliberately—because we need a word stronger than “memory” to describe the violence that remains alive within our societies. I use it also because the death camps represent only the final stage in capitalism’s descent into barbarism. Auschwitz is the terminus of a continuum of oppression instantiated with each capitalist crisis as the state’s monopoly on violence is deployed to preserve the status quo. The despairing deaths of those denied their dignity come long before the killing fields. The judgement is all the more damning when we compare the counterfactual. Not every socialist country collapsed in the 1990s, and those that retained the socialist model fared significantly better than those that regressed into capitalist exploitation. While Russia saw male life expectancy plummet from 63.8 years in 1990 to 57.7 years in 1994, Cuba—despite experiencing its own severe economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union—saw male life expectancy continue to rise, from 72.2 years in 1990 to 74.2 years in 2000.¹ This stark divergence cannot be attributed to cultural or historical factors. It is a direct outcome of dramatically different forms of economic organization, where one channels productive forces towards the betterment of human life, and the other towards lining the pockets of a minority.

Seen from the perspective of the Washington boys and their agents across Eastern Europe, the mortality crisis represents not a failure of transition policies but their success. It saw an unprecedented siphoning of public wealth and power into the hands of transnational capital and the domestic comprador class, the beating down of forces of resistance, the truncating of lives that otherwise sapped profit, and the installation of ideological tools to secure the new consensus. Nearly seventeen million people died, and they do not have much of a footnote in the historiography of that period. Their memory must be reclaimed. The victims of Eastern Europe’s neoliberal holocaust must be situated alongside history’s many colonial exterminations. Their loss must serve as a reminder not only of the possibility, but of the necessity of organizing our societies around human need rather than profit—and of defending that new order by any means necessary. Remembering the

price that has been paid is not an exercise in mourning, but an act of political consciousness. It is one step towards accepting the cost that must be borne in building a world free of exploitation.

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